

Baltimore's good shipping news

Our view: Locating badly needed CSX intermodal facility at Mount Clare a sensible choice and big win for the region's economy

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As shocking as it may seem, there are times when local government and the private sector can work together for mutual benefit in a way that promotes economic development while simultaneously protecting a community's quality of life. The \$95 million plan to create a new intermodal rail facility at the Mount Clare train yard in Southwest Baltimore has provided just such an opportunity.

For several years, officials from CSX Transportation and the Maryland Department of Transportation have been struggling to find a way to bypass the Howard Street rail tunnel and better connect the Seagirt Terminal with the CSX rail network. The project is particularly important to accommodate future growth at the port from the bigger ships expected in Baltimore in a few years, a prospect made possible by the ongoing widening of the Panama Canal.

Already, Ports America is investing tens of millions to develop a deep-water berth in Baltimore, but those efforts will be seriously undermined if the Howard Street tunnel remains a major bottleneck for rail shipments to and from the port. What CSX needed was a site south of Howard Street where cargo going to and from the port could be loaded or unloaded from freight trains capable of transporting containers double-stacked for efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Initially, planners looked to the suburbs to find a tract large enough for such an ambitious project, but those sites proved problematic — costly, subject to extensive public and environmental review and, most alarmingly, strongly opposed by local residents. In Elkridge, for instance, neighborhood groups had vigorously protested the prospect of the intermodal facility being located there, chiefly because of noise and traffic.

Indeed, the "final" four sites offered by the Department of Transportation and CSX included not a single one in Baltimore. All that changed earlier this year when project leaders decided to take a second look at the city, a change of heart that resulted in no small measure from the efforts of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. In a letter to CSX CEO Michael Ward last April, she expressed unconditional support for the project and urged the company look to the city for a site. "Let's make it happen," the mayor concluded.

Mount Clare was likely overlooked initially because it was already a CSX rail yard, and at 70 acres, it's smaller than what was originally envisioned. But officials say they can make the site work. It's far from a perfect fit. It may, for instance, require use of tracks currently assigned to the adjacent B&O Railroad Museum, and the yard is about two miles from Interstate 95 (which

is less than ideal for the loading and off-loading of containers on trucks). But ultimately, it should allow CSX to increase its shipping capacity by 30 percent.

That represents a significant and welcome boost to the economy — not only because CSX jobs are high-paying (an average of \$94,000 in wages and benefits per employee, according to the company) but because the welfare of the port is so vital to Maryland's economic future. The port already accounts for some 50,000 jobs and \$5.6 billion in total economic activity in the region, and Baltimore is positioned to become one of only two East Coast ports capable of handling the big ships, at least initially.

Yet the project still has some hurdles to overcome. Nearly half its development costs are expected to be underwritten by the state, including \$2.5 million in initial planning money, the donation of some state-owned land at Mount Clare and \$30 million to help build it. Gov. Martin O'Malley will have to persuade lawmakers in Annapolis to support that spending.

It shouldn't be too difficult a sell. Other states have spent tax dollars on similar projects because the potential payoff more than justifies such public investment. Like tax dollars spent on highways, airports and other forms of transportation, the economic activity such a project generates, including new jobs — and tax revenue — will easily cover the cost.

And it shouldn't hurt that it's a prime example of smart growth, too. Instead of tearing up open space in the suburbs, CSX will be recycling a rail yard that it now uses for storage. The company has also promised to install zero-emission cranes, a first for such a facility on the East Coast. Perhaps it might even help meet another of the mayor's goals — to attract 10,000 more families to Baltimore over the next 10 years. Such win-win-win opportunities may be infrequent in these economically challenged times, but they deserve some kudos when they do happen.
